ECOSYSTEM STATUS INDICATORS
Habitat
HAPC Biota – Aleutian Islands
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This is the first look at biomass index trends of HAPC biota (seapens/whips, coral, sponges, and anemones) from the RACE bottom trawl survey in the Aleutian Islands. This survey is not designed to assess these organisms and further detailed examination of these results is needed to assess whether there are meaningful trends.

Sea anemones are common in trawl catches but the apparent large increase seen in the southern Bering Sea in 2000 was due to two large catches of 27 kg and 48 kg with other catches rarely exceeding 3 kg (Figure 38). The generally low CPUE of sea anemones in the Aleutian Islands compared to the GOA may be due the "rareness" of suitable habitat. The apparent increase in abundance of soft corals in the central Aleutians in 1991, gorgonian corals in the western Aleutians in 1991 and stony corals in the central Aleutians in 1997 was also highly influenced by a few unusually large catches. The relative abundance of sea pens appears to be increasing in most areas however catch rates tend to be quite low (Figure 38). Seapens may require habitat with higher flow and very fine sand. Flat, sandy bottom substrates are rarer in the Aleutian Islands compared to the GOA or BS, resulting in a patchy distribution and, therefore, high variability in seapen CPUE. In contrast, the frequency of occurrence and relative abundance of sponges has been consistently high in each of the three Aleutian regions but like many of these groups it is unknown whether the survey is an appropriate tool for measuring or tracking abundance.

The 2004 survey results showed a slight decrease in sponge and sea pen abundance in all areas except the southern Bering Sea, which showed a modest gain. The abundance of stony corals decreased in all areas; whereas, catches of soft corals and Gorgonians were variable among areas.

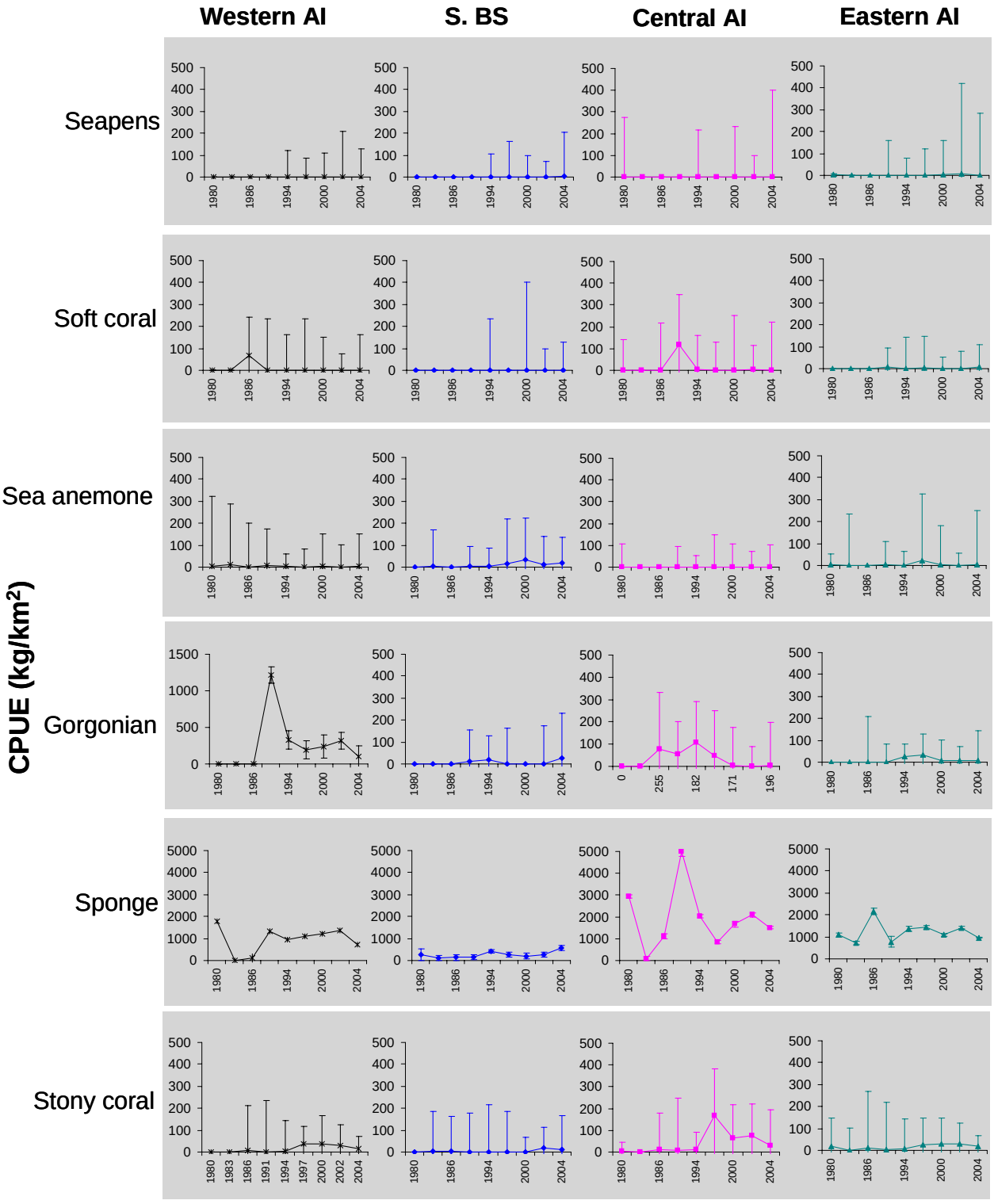

Figure 38. Catch of HAPC organisms per unit area in the western Aleutian Islands (AI), south Bering Sea (BS), central AI, and eastern AI, in bottom trawl surveys conducted between 1980 and 2004. 95% confidence intervals are shown.